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Evaluation of UNCTAD activities: Overview

Report by the Secretary-General of UNCTAD

Introduction

1. This report provides an overview of the external evaluations of UNCTAD programmes and projects undertaken between the period of April 2014 and March 2015. This information is presented to allow more detailed reporting on all evaluation activities and promote learning, as well as support UNCTAD's accountability to its member States and other stakeholders.

I. Summary of evaluation findings

2. Evaluations at UNCTAD are conducted against the criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability, consistent with the standards outlined by the United Nations Evaluation Group. The objectives of such assessments are to draw conclusions on the work implemented, to make recommendations on enhancements needed and to identify lessons learned. Such information can help inform the design, planning and implementation of future work.

3. Five evaluations were completed during the reporting period covered by this overview. The following paragraphs elaborate on the key findings, recommendations and lessons learned from these evaluations.

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A. Evaluation of UNCTAD's subprogramme 2: Investment and enterprise, 2010–2013

4. At the sixtieth executive session of the Trade and Development Board, member States requested an independent evaluation of UNCTAD subprogramme 2 on investment and enterprise, with the objective of assessing the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact of work of the subprogramme during the period 2010–2013 in relation to its mandates and of proposing enhancements as appropriate.

5. The findings of the evaluation were that the subprogramme has a solid, established record of data development and research, consensus-building and technical cooperation. The evaluation team observed that the subprogramme is strongly aligned with the Millennium Development Goals and has a critical role to play in the discussion on the contribution of foreign direct investment and private sector investment to development in the context of the post-2015 sustainable development goals. The evaluation highlighted that the subprogramme's database on foreign direct investment is unique, and that its research on issues and polices on foreign direct investment is highly valued by policymakers and private investors. The evaluation also concluded that, though the technical assistance provided is in high demand, the Division on Investment and Enterprise, which implements the subprogramme with limited extrabudgetary resources, may struggle at times to respond to all demands as expeditiously as desired. Finally, the evaluation concluded that mainstreaming of gender equity and women's empowerment in the work of the subprogramme could be improved.

6. On the basis of its findings, some of the recommendations made by the evaluation team to the Division responsible for the subprogramme include the following: (a) to track more consistently the long-term development impact of investment-related and private sector-related work among beneficiary countries at the programme level; (b) to continue updating and revamping the subprogramme's websites to improve the effectiveness of outreach and communications; (c) to increase participation in Government–development partner dialogue taking place at the country level as a means of accessing additional extrabudgetary resources (with support from the Technical Cooperation Service); and (d) to use current work related to the sustainable development goals to revisit how best to strengthen gender equity issues in its work.

7. In its management response to the evaluation, the secretariat welcomed all recommendations and stated that it would continue its work and initiatives in line with the recommendations made in the evaluation.

8. At the conclusion of the Working Party, member States noted with appreciation the findings of strong relevance, significant impact, broad sustainability and effective and efficient delivery of work by the secretariat under the subprogramme. Member States also expressed their appreciation to the independent evaluation team for the evaluation report and emphasized the importance of the independent evaluation process for UNCTAD in contributing to sharing of information, learning and improvement of programme effectiveness and accountability.

B. Evaluation of Development Account projects

9. External evaluations were also completed for four projects that were supported by the sixth and the seventh tranches of the United Nations Development Account: (a) Strengthening the capacity of policymakers and business leaders in three BioTrade beneficiary countries in integrating "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation" (REDD+) projects into BioTrade strategies (project 0809AS);

(b) Strengthening capacities for policy-oriented analysis of key global development challenges at developing country universities (project 0809AR); (c) Strengthening capacity for effective asset and liability management in national debt management offices (project 1011R); and (d) Capacity-building for control authorities and transport operators to improve efficiency of cross-border transport in landlocked and transit developing countries (project 0809AP).

(i) External evaluation of Development Account project 0809AS: Strengthening the capacity of policymakers and business leaders in three BioTrade beneficiary countries in integrating REDD+ projects into BioTrade strategies

10. This project was operational from February 2013 to December 2013 and aimed at strengthening the capacities of three developing countries in formulating and implementing mutually supportive trade, environment, and sustainable development strategies in line with BioTrade and REDD+ practices. It aimed to achieve its results through providing technical assistance and training to improve the understanding of policymakers and business leaders of the linkages between BioTrade and REDD+. The project also aimed to use the established South–South platform for the sharing of information and best practices in the formulation and implementation of BioTrade and REDD+ projects.

11. The main activities of the project were the development of a training manual in English and Spanish, four national and/or regional workshops, conducting two e-learning courses, providing advisory services to each of the beneficiary countries, and organization of one international workshop to promote South–South cooperation. Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador were the three countries that participated in this project.

12. The evaluation confirmed the relevance of the project and found that it had good linkage with other initiatives of UNCTAD in the same sector. Over 90 per cent of the e-learning course graduates and targeted survey respondents confirmed the relevance of the training. The evaluator noted the significant delay in starting the project, but observed that it implemented the main activities planned prior to its conclusion. Feedback from workshop participants across the three countries was mixed, with participants from two countries providing a very positive assessment (90 per cent positive) of the effectiveness of the training in improving their knowledge, while only 50 per cent of participants from one country indicated the same opinion. The evaluator further pointed out that the low pass rates of the e-learning courses in two countries imply a loss in cost-effectiveness. The evaluator noted that the project lacked an explicit exit strategy to ensure its sustainability. Nonetheless, the evaluator concluded that the project team can continue to support the stakeholders because of the team's role as implementers of the BioTrade Facilitation Programme.

13. Based on the findings and conclusions, the recommendations proposed by the evaluator include the following: (a) consider applying the BioTrade Impact Assessment System developed based on the BioTrade/REDD+ project proposals to follow up on results achieved 6–9 months post intervention in an effort to measure contributions of the project to sustainable development in the beneficiary countries; (b) create external synergies by establishing close links with the United Nations REDD programme and analyse the mechanisms to integrate BioTrade concepts in REDD+ countries; (c) design a strategy to target the relevant participants of the e-learning courses, and engage focal points in the beneficiary country in proposing candidates who are in a position to increase institutional-level capacity-building; (d) seek options for local hosting of training courses.

(ii) External evaluation of Development Account project 0809AR: Strengthening capacities for policy-oriented analysis of key global development challenges at developing country universities

14. This project aimed to strengthen the capacity of developing country academics to conduct policy-oriented analysis of key developmental challenges related to the potential contribution of trade to poverty reduction, and also to foster cooperation between academics and policymakers. More specifically, the project sought to facilitate the policymakers' use of the analysis conducted by academics in their formulation of policies that would help developing countries address the challenges they face, particularly in the area of trade and poverty. The project focused on developing and least developed countries in the selection of participants for the online training course and research phases. It involved 163 researchers and policymakers. The online course had 108 participants successfully completing all training modules. Participants came from 56 developing countries and countries in transition, out of which 19 were least developed countries. The project provided coaching to top graduates of the online courses on collaborative research papers addressing policy-relevant trade and poverty research topics. A book and 11 research papers resulted from these collaborations.

15. The evaluation concluded that the project has been very relevant in its design and implementation of activities addressing the needs of developing countries. In particular, UNCTAD's Virtual Institute's (Vi) network has been useful in linking the academics to policymakers, which enhanced the relevance of the research completed under the project. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the project was commended, with the evaluator noting that the project has either met or exceeded all the performance targets set out in its logical framework. The evaluator conducted a comparative analysis of the project with similar training offered by other organizations, and concluded that the Vi operated very effectively in a niche market by having a unique combination of three features: direct teaching and research support, a focus on academics, and close mentoring. The evaluator observed that the project is highly efficient in delivering a given number of outputs with a given volume of inputs. Moreover, the strategy of using Vi's university network to find new ways of interacting with academia works well, as Vi complements the other ways in which UNCTAD interacts with universities both as an organization and through individual staff members, leveraging the wealth of academic expertise spread across UNCTAD.

16. On the basis of the findings, the recommendations proposed by the evaluator include the following: (a) projects such as this should be further encouraged, supported and strengthened; (b) UNCTAD should seek additional donors to both assure funding stability and to diversify the research support, in order to support research and "peer-learning" among participants from middle-income countries' academia and ensure high-level research outputs; (c) UNCTAD should seriously consider strengthening the Vi team as the Vi's continuous success is currently very dependent on a limited number of staff members.

(iii) Evaluation of Development Account project 1011R: Strengthening capacity for effective asset and liability management in national debt management offices

17. The objective of this project was to strengthen the institutional capacity of national debt management offices in six developing countries from the African, Latin American and Caribbean regions to manage their public debt and develop their capacity to move to a debt management approach based on an integrated asset and liability management (ALM) framework, which is a new approach followed in a few developed countries, led by Denmark and New Zealand. The project complemented UNCTAD's current engagement through its Debt Management and Financial Analysis programme to assist debt management offices in their data collection/reporting role and risk analysis capacities.

18. The main activities of the project were as follows: the development of research papers; conducting in-country assessments of the current capacities of debt management offices to collect, classify and analyse the structure of public debt and the state of readiness to move from a pure liability management approach to an integrated ALM approach; organizing regional and interregional workshops and study tours to enable knowledge-sharing for participant countries as well as other non-beneficiaries. The project was implemented in six countries: Argentina, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Chile (in place of Mexico as originally intended), Ethiopia, Uganda and Zambia, with the cooperation of two regional partners: the Inter-American Development Bank and the Macroeconomic and Financial Management Institute of Eastern and Southern Africa.

19. The evaluation concluded that the project was based on sound intervention logic and rationale, responded to the concerns expressed by UNCTAD's clients and constituencies, and addressed issues that emerged from recent global developments in financial markets that had implications for debt sustainability in several countries and regions. The evaluator observed that the project used available synergies between various parts of UNCTAD, although there was still considerable scope for cooperation in leveraging the opportunities and flexibilities provided by Development Account projects. The evaluator noted, however, that while the thematic focus of the project on an important emerging issue in the domain of debt management was highly relevant, it was perceived as premature for least developed countries that do not have evolved debt management capabilities. This resulted in a trade-off between the standardized programme of activities that was originally planned, against the immediate needs articulated by the participating countries.

20. Although the project did not complete all its activities due to factors beyond the reasonable control of the implementing unit, the evaluator commended the project team for their efforts to step up the pace of delivery in the last year of implementation. The project did not attain all its target results, partly due to non-completion of some activities, and partly due to overambitious formulation of some outcomes. However, the evaluator recognized that the project enabled debt management offices to appraise their states of readiness and identify building blocks to implement ALM practices in their countries. This outcome, in the evaluator's opinion, has seeded the process of change within the national institutional structures towards a roadmap for ALM adoption.

21. On the basis of the findings, the recommendations proposed by the evaluator include the following: (a) because the theme of ALM is complex and requires sustained engagement to develop upstream knowledge and tools to help member countries to put in place the building blocks for ALM sequentially, UNCTAD should formulate a pipeline of projects over the medium term, all set in a well-structured sequence; (b) great emphasis and adequate budgetary provisions should be made for electronic and multimedia dissemination and e-learning tools; (c) during planning of similar projects in the future, UNCTAD should evaluate the merit of implementing a standardized programme of activities in homogeneous groups, rather than accommodating a diversified profile of countries.

(iv) Evaluation of Development Account project 0809AP: Capacity-building for control authorities and transport operators to improve efficiency of cross-border transport in landlocked and transit developing countries

22. This project was implemented by the Economic Commission for Africa, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and UNCTAD, with ESCAP having a lead role and with the support of the Economic Commission for Africa sub-regional office in East Africa and the ESCAP subregional office in Central Asia. The objective of this project was to provide landlocked and transit developing countries with innovative and sustainable capacities to plan and implement regional transport facilitation initiatives. Activities of the project include: development of a cross-border and

transit transport process management toolkit; organization of workshops on the use of the toolkit; and development of national and corridor action plans. Burundi, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Rwanda, Tajikistan and the United Republic of Tanzania are the six countries that participated in this project.

23. The evaluation confirmed the relevance of the project to the development context of the beneficiary countries and to their needs for analytical tools and platforms to identify the transport barriers and their causes. The evaluator observed that most of the planned outputs were delivered by the project, and that the project tackled the barriers both at the national and corridor levels in an intertwined manner. However, the evaluator noted that the project lacked clear measures towards the formal adoption of action plans and the mechanisms to ensure recommendations from the action plans are transformed into the national policies. The evaluator noted that the project was executed with significant delays, and observed that the multiparty design affected the efficiency of project implementation. In fact, the fragmented implementation arrangements and the lack of effective communication between the implementing agencies were reasons for the non-accomplishment of some activities. However, the evaluator also noted that the project managers were very active in resolving a number of challenges that emerged during the project. With regard to sustainability, the evaluator concluded that the level of uptake of the recommendations from the national action plans to feed into formal strategies is likely to vary among the countries, with two countries having a high level of uptake and the other four having medium to low levels of uptake.

24. On the basis of the findings, the recommendations proposed by the evaluator include the following: (a) ensure streamlined management arrangements, clear reporting lines, and self-monitoring mechanisms in joint proposals that involve multiple implementation agencies; (b) engage high ranking officials of the beneficiary country when conducting needs analysis and drafting project proposals; (c) mainstream gender in future project design by ensuring explicit mechanisms are put in place and budget provisions are allocated for such purposes; (d) implement a second phase of the project if further funding is available to cover the promotion of the toolkit and to support the adoption and harmonization of national/regional policies in line with the priorities identified in the action plans.

II. Lessons learned

25. Following the standards and principles of the United Nations Evaluation Group and the Development Cooperation Directorate of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, lessons learned represent contributions to general knowledge that can be applied beyond the immediate object of an evaluation and thus bear relevance to a broader range of situations. Lessons learned from the previous evaluations of UNCTAD activities are contained in overview documents TD/B/WP/254 and TD/B/WP/263, which remain recommended references for programme managers and project officers in designing and managing their programmes and projects. With respect to the evaluations discussed in the current report, 10 key lessons may be drawn from the findings and conclusions presented herein.

A. Lessons learned on project design

26. The development of an explicit and clear theory of change is a critical requirement for sound programme management and effective stakeholder engagement. A theory of change provides a means of testing assumptions and validating causal linkages between

activities, outputs, and outcomes, thus yielding an adaptive framework for measuring and achieving results.

27. Programme managers should design capacity-building projects with reasonable time frames to ensure sequenced implementation of the project and to leave room for follow-up on activities to sustain the results, ensuring that the activities bring about concrete changes and benefits to the targeted beneficiaries.

28. Sufficient resources should be allocated to the assessment of the needs, national interest and risks when developing project proposals. Whenever possible, there should be engagement with high-level officials of the beneficiary country when conducting needs analysis and drafting project proposals.

29. For projects that have capacity-building of national institutions as one of the key objectives, programme managers could consider offering a comprehensive package of activities that not only includes training of individuals on technical knowledge but also the development of institutional capacities through means such as training of trainers.

30. When project resources are limited, it may be more efficient and effective to implement a standardized programme of activities in homogeneous groups, instead of accommodating a diversified profile of countries. A robust needs analysis at the project design stage could indicate if such an approach is merited.

31. During project planning, mechanisms to promote the uptake of the recommendations/project outputs should be built into the project. For instance, programme managers could consider ensuring a well-designed communication strategy that targets other international organizations and/or international financing institutions as well as various national institutions. Furthermore, linkages with larger projects and initiatives to promote sustainability of interventions could be envisioned and pursued.

B. Lessons learned on implementation approaches

32. In order to broaden UNCTAD's reach, project managers are encouraged to use distance learning and e-learning tools and platforms when delivering training outputs, particularly when resources do not allow for such training to be delivered in multiple target countries.

33. The engagement and commitment of country/institutional counterparts is fundamental in the selection of candidates for UNCTAD's capacity-building activities, namely intensive training courses and workshops, to mitigate the drop out of participants due to conflicting priorities in the workplace.

34. The management of UNCTAD should take into consideration succession issues of the project team to ensure the continued success of similar future projects and interventions.

35. In a project that involves multiple implementing agencies, collaborating agencies need to ensure streamlined management arrangements and clear reporting lines, and to build in a self-monitoring mechanism to mitigate the risks associated with multiple operations.

III. Evaluation plan for 2016–2018

36. The Working Party on the Strategic Framework and the Programme Budget fulfils an important oversight function through its consideration each year of external evaluations of UNCTAD programmes. The subject of the evaluation is usually in accordance with a three-year evaluation plan that is approved by the Trade and Development Board.

In accordance with established practice, following decision 2003/7 of 19 September 2003 (see TD/B/50/12-TD/B/WP/169, chapter I, section B) to invite the secretariat to propose future evaluation plans, the secretariat proposed an evaluation plan for 2016–2018 for consideration by member States at the sixty-eighth session of the Working Party.

37. In line with the decision of the Trade and Development Board at its fifty-ninth session regarding measures to strengthen results-based management and the evaluation of programmes of work, the Working Party agreed at its sixty-third session to a trial implementation of the approach of ensuring the systematic evaluations of UNCTAD subprogrammes. Accordingly, in 2013, the Working Party considered the external evaluation of subprogramme 1; in 2014 the external evaluation of subprogramme 2 was considered, and for 2015 the external evaluation of subprogramme 3 on international trade will be considered at the seventy-first session.

38. To complete the cycle of subprogramme evaluations, member States are requested to approve the proposed evaluation plan, which follows the numerical sequence of the subprogrammes (that is, subprogramme 4 will be evaluated in 2017 and subprogramme 5 in 2018), as illustrated in the table below. As these evaluations are usually undertaken primarily during the first quarter of the year by an evaluation team comprising a professional evaluator supported by two representatives of UNCTAD's member States who participate in the evaluations in a personal capacity, a subprogramme evaluation is not proposed for 2016 in view of the preparations for and activities associated with the fourteenth session of the Conference.

Evaluation plan for 2016–2018

Year	*Title*
2016	Conference year – No external evaluation to be considered by the Working Party
2017	External evaluation of subprogramme 4
2018	External evaluation of subprogramme 5

39. The Working Party is invited to review this next iteration of the evaluation plan and to submit its conclusions and recommendations to the Trade and Development Board.